

EIFF Review – Between 2 Fires

By **David Kettle**

✘ Agnieszka Lukasiak's harrowing and angry film follows young mother Marta and her daughter as they escape child prostitution in their home country of Belarus and flee to a refugee camp in the snowy wildernesses of northern Sweden.

Assured that the camp is not a prison, they are nevertheless trapped by government bureaucracy deciding on their right to stay in the country, and at the mercy of the camp's sinister residents and employees. Warned of rapes in the showers, and sharing a room with a woman who hides a knife under her pillow, they hold out a naïve hope for the future despite the odds against them.

There's an all-pervasive mood of doom and helplessness throughout the film that makes it an unavoidably difficult watch, despite compelling performances from the leads, especially Magdalena Poplawska in the lead role and Simon Kassianides as her uncertain beacon of hope.

Moments of hope, even happiness, emerge as Marta forms bonds with the other camp residents – a party to celebrate her moving out of the camp into a flat in the nearby town seems to come from nowhere, and there are long, almost voyeuristic sex scenes between Marta and her new-found lover.

But Lukasiak seems to take a perverse delight in shattering them at will. Her approach allows for little light and shade – Marta and daughter are innocents lost in a cruel world, and those against them are emotionless bureaucrats or wicked exploiters – and Lukasiak slowly grinds her characters into the ground with plot twists that leave the two women helpless and alone.

Maybe we do need to be reminded how hard life is for refugees.

But a more subtle approach that probed deeper into its characters' motivations and questioned stereotypes could only have made a stronger case.

Between 2 Fires; Sweden/Poland, 2010; 130mins